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Learning, using and exchanging global competence in the context of international postgraduate mobility

Abstract

The paper offers a theoretically grounded analysis of international postgraduate students' perspectives on the importance and development of global citizenship knowledge and competences while they are studying, and how these are valued and enacted afterwards. It draws on a series of interviews with non-Western international postgraduates during their studies in the UK and upon return to their home countries. It uses the concepts of social and cultural cosmopolitan competences as a framework to discuss the perceived benefits of educational mobility, and the possibilities and limits of social connectedness and openness in the internationalised university environment.

Introduction

In the contemporary context of globalisation, when technology and other forces have exponentially increased the global flows of people, information, images, investments, policies, and knowledge (Appadurai 1996; Rizvi 2008), deepening the international and global connectivity of higher education (HE) and its graduates is both a necessity and a *de facto* reality. By definition, internationalisation means that international dimensions are incorporated into all aspects of university life, including teaching, research and service functions (Knight 2007). Within HE's teaching and learning functions, student mobility (and, therefore, the presence of international students with a range of backgrounds, experiences and future needs) is one of the key aspects of internationalisation. So too is the development of global citizenship for all learners, which is gaining increasing attention as a goal and graduate attribute but demands further exploration. It is in this context that this article explores challenges, limitations and benefits of the development of 'cosmopolitan competency' among international students and graduates of UK universities.

Research has demonstrated that many university leaders believe that student mobility and diverse classrooms inculcate a cosmopolitan outlook and competences among all students, both home and international (Amit 2010). Documents on internationalisation and student mobility are filled with claims about intercultural learning, global outlooks and understanding of ‘difference’ (Brooks and Waters 2011: 15). Despite this faith in its outcomes, international study agendas have not been unproblematic (Brooks and Waters 2011). Some research suggests that international study can bring about a change in outlook (Madge et al 2009) and ‘intercultural adaptation’, after rising to a range of challenges (Gu et al 2010). However, a body of literature also suggests that, in many cases, educational mobility does not have this effect and certain aspects of international students’ cultural beliefs and values may be beyond modification or ‘integration’ and will never be completely abandoned for others (Kim 2005). For example, Andersson et al.’s (2012) study discussed both home and international students’ perspectives on the issues of encounter and difference within the HE context, illuminating in a broad sense some of the obstacles between members of a culturally diverse society. Differences in social lifestyle, culture, religious beliefs, language and sexuality across the student body are critical catalysts of many of the tensions that exist on campus between international and home students, argue Andersson et al (2012: 512), thus questioning whether ‘engagement with diversity’ extends beyond the glossy brochures and pictures of multi-ethnic crowds on campus. Work such as this raises significant questions about the extent to which, and how, students encounter ‘difference’ and thus the opportunities available to them for developing a more cosmopolitan perspective as a result of educational mobility (Brooks and Waters 2011: 16).

Drawing on literature on cosmopolitanism and social and cultural cosmopolitan competences, the paper contributes to the debate on educational mobility, and the possibilities and limits of social connectedness and openness in the internationalised university environment. The paper uses interviews with non-Western international students conducted during their study in the UK and after graduation and return to their home countries, in order to explore what is valued by them and by future employers and the challenges that they face in learning, using and exchanging the competences associated with international study. In the discussion below we set out a conceptual framework and review other relevant studies before discussing the empirical work.

Seeking global competence in the study abroad experience

There is a substantial and growing body of literature on the experiences of international students, including studies of their intercultural and academic experiences (e.g. Gu et al. 2010; Schweisfurth and Gu 2009; UKCISA 2007; Coleman 2004; Moskal 2017). In terms of individual student's outcomes, "global (intercultural) competence" frequently appears in academic literature as a benefit of internationalization, (Deardorff, de Wit and Heyl 2012; Odağ, Wallin and Kedzior 2016), sometimes used interchangeably with concepts such as 'multicultural competence', 'cross-cultural awareness', or 'intercultural sensitivity' (Fantini 2009: 457). In the plurality of theoretical models, there has been a lack of uniform definition of what such competence means and students' individual and collective views and voices have received relatively little attention. The dominant perspective in the relevant literature and among university administrators places emphasis on skills and individual development linked to self-awareness and self-reflection (Odağ, Wallin and Kedzior 2016). Odağ et al. (2016: 123-24) argue that these models of student (intercultural) competence have been developed through a Western lens by Western scholars in the individualistic societies of the US, UK or Australia. Individualistic orientations give personal goals and development priority over collective aspects, such as community and social connectedness with friends and family. Odağ et al. highlight the distinction between individualistic and collective cultural orientations as important when investigating student's intercultural competence beyond the 'Western'¹ world.

Some of these studies examine how students acquire and express an orientation of openness to foreign others and cultures. This can be linked to research on cosmopolitanism, with its positive implication as a key to solving economic, political, and ecological problems at the global level (Beck and Sznaider, 2006; 2010; Delanty, 2006). Similar to the official policy discourses, in theoretical debates 'cosmopolitanism' has been seen in positive terms as the process of 'encountering and negotiation difference, as a creative and productive exercise, facilitated by the changes wrought by globalisation (Brooks and Waters 2011:14). The research on international students, however, seems often to overlook the critical concerns of how cosmopolitanism (see, for example, Calhoun 2008; Harvey 2009) may be related to economic inequalities and power relations around the world (Igarashi and Saito 2014: 222-3). Not everyone has an equal opportunity to develop cosmopolitan competences, and the norms and values that define them are not necessarily universally shared. According to Kim (2012: 475),

¹ The use of the term 'Western' in the article is not intended to imply two worlds – East and West – but is used as a signifier to denote groups associated with the dominant cultures of primarily Europe, North America, and Australia/New Zealand.

most research analyses of international students take a functionalist perspective, and as a result that fails to show how the global academic system and its multidimensional tensions affect the international students. Kim argues that from a functionalist perspective, ‘adaptation’ or ‘adjustment’ is a process of understanding, and acquiring knowledge, values, norms, and roles in an academic situation, while ignoring ‘how the global academic system and its hierarchy affects international students and members of the local community’. This means that the experiences of international students are often examined without consideration of the environment that frames them and the inequalities that shape it.

To address this, in recent years, some critical voices have begun to apply Pierre Bourdieu’s work to examine cosmopolitanism as a new element of cultural capital, a locus of struggles for dominant positions in a global world (Kim 2011, Weenink, 2007, 2008). For example, Kim links academic power relations to the production and recognition of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1994). This cultural capital relates to the question of professional knowledge, a university degree (institutionalised culture capital), English language (embodied culture capital) and academic competency (Kim 2012: 457). Some authors, including Igarashi and Saito (2014) have argued that languages and cultural practices in the West, especially in higher education institutions of North America and Western Europe, are still widely seen as embodying the highest standards of academic excellence and conferring academic qualifications as cultural capital to excel in a global world. This means that it is easier for people who were born and grew up in the West to acquire cosmopolitanism as cultural capital because academic qualifications that are only local or national for them are simultaneously regarded as global (Igarashi and Saito 2014: 228).

Arguably, cosmopolitanism is also a source of social competence, defined by Glick Schiller, Darieva and Gruner-Domic (2011) as ‘cosmopolitan sociability’. Glick Schiller et al (2011: 403) suggest that in understanding cosmopolitanism ‘as arising from social relationships that do not negate cultural, religious or gendered differences but see people as capable of relationships of experiential commonalities despite differences’, cosmopolitan sociability can provide another lens through which to view and theorise social experiences of internationally mobile students. We suggest that social and cultural cosmopolitan competence have significant potential as appropriate conceptual tools to understand how students react to the cosmopolitan condition as well as their more local existence during and after their studies. We ask whether mobility for education or an international study environment gives students new knowledge,

competences, attitudes and value orientations that can sometimes be translated into forms of cosmopolitan capital to engage in globalising social arenas. We ask whether openness towards others translates ultimately into pragmatic abilities to deal with new situations and new environments, and whether these convert to benefits on the labour market and in future life.

Cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan competency

Cosmopolitanism has become a topic of considerable attention but also a controversy, particularly in the light of new modes of transnational interconnectedness and increasing ethnic diversity. Definitions of cosmopolitanism vary, depending on whether it is viewed as a socio-cultural condition, philosophy or world-view, a political project, or a mode of practice or competence (Vertovec and Cohen 2002). We draw particularly on Vertovec (2009) who notes that cosmopolitanism can be understood as a combination of attitudes (dispositions), practices and competences (skills), gathered from experiences of travel or displacement and transnational contact. Similarly, Skrbis, Kendall and Woodward (2004) focus on specific types of attitudes and dispositions that distinguish cosmopolitans (or ‘cosmopolites’) from non-cosmopolitans. They suggest that particular encompassing beliefs, attitudes and values can be identified as ‘cosmopolitan dispositions’ and assert that there are identifiable ‘carriers’ of cosmopolitan dispositions. The question here is whether and how university students may become such carriers.

In terms of disposition, scholars suggest that cosmopolitanism should be understood principally as an attitude of ‘openness’, a willingness to engage with the other, an intellectual and aesthetic openness towards divergent cultural experiences (Hannerz, 1996; Wardle 2011; Cohen 2004). Exploring the relative merits of cosmopolitanism in postcolonial contexts, Enslin (2016: 151) emphasises cosmopolitanism as vulnerable to the criticism of Eurocentrism and unreflective universalism that favours European assumptions and interests. The criticism of ‘cosmopolitanism’ relates to its association with Western universalism rooted in the free-flowing global commodity market and opposed to non-Western - Oriental particularism understood as being rooted in local traditions of social and economic order (Pinches, 1999: 9, quoted by Singh and Doherty 2008). Critical cosmopolitanism highlights that cosmopolitanism is also a source of power (Delanty 2006; 2014) and can be understood as a form of capital: cosmopolitan capital (Weenink 2007). Specifically, it is a new form of capital that helps those who possess it to operate in ‘globalizing social arenas ... in which the struggle is for privileged positions’ that require competencies to effectively interact with people of multiple nationalities

(Weenink, 2008: 1092). In Bourdieu's generalisation, any 'competence' becomes a capital insofar as it facilitates access to the societal culture. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) assert that cultural 'habits and dispositions' comprise a resource capable of generating 'profits'; they are also potentially subject to monopolisation by individuals and groups. Therefore, certain types of competence as capital create opportunities for 'exclusive advantages' over others who lack such competences (Bourdieu 1986). Kim also considers a 'cosmopolitan attitude and lifestyle' as part of '[g]lobal cultural capital ... understood as exclusive resources that designate one's class and status, globally operate, circulate, and exchange' (2011: 113). Another critique of cosmopolitanism and its apparently transcendental values highlights its relative inaccessibility to subaltern social groups within 'Western' countries as well as outside of them, perpetuating alienation and disadvantage (Popkewitz 2008). It is also true that on the whole, international students are an elite group in themselves: either intellectually elite (as recipients of scholarships) or financially elite (and therefore possessing of family resources to pay for their study) or, potentially, both (Gu and Schweisfurth 2015).

In the context of internationalisation, some authors (e.g. Kim 2011, 2012) have raised the issue of international students' voice or more often a lack of equal voice. For example, Kim (2011, 2012) uses the notion of 'academic subalterns' to show how the hegemony of American universities is formed in the experiences of Korean international students. Kim argues that this leads to the construction of international education as Anglo-American education with English as the mode of communication. For students, having a voice requires practical (e.g. language) and symbolic knowledge to be recognised and valued by others (Couldry 2010: 7). It also involves an ongoing exchange of the narratives 'between us and others' (Couldey 2010: 8). These may be challenging in contexts of the internationalised university environment where 'foreign' students often feel like they do not belong to the place they study. In a similar vein, Glick, Schiller, Darieva and Gruner-Domic (2011: 403) emphasise social competence using the concept of cosmopolitan sociability to scrutinise the notion of openness to difference. Their approach rests on a concept of binary alterity that constructs a hierarchy of unequal power as the foundation of social relationships (Glick Schiller 2010). Aligning with these calls for student voice and a critical perspective on the assumptions regarding cosmopolitan competence; this approach to cosmopolitanism allows examining the possibilities and limitations on openness (Glick Schiller, Darieva and Gruner-Domic 2011: 403).

The study context and method

Particular regions and countries are over- and under- represented on the global map of student mobilities (Waters 2016). The majority of mobile students come from Asia and Africa – the non-West. While this majority of mobile students study in a region other than their own, American and European students tend to stay in their region, in a similar socio-economic environment. Recently, the number of international students enrolled in Higher Education in OECD countries has been, on average, three times the number of students from OECD countries studying abroad. Within the OECD area, EU21² countries host the largest proportion (35%) of international students. However, some 71% of international students enrolled in EU21 countries come from another EU21 country. North America is also an attractive region for international students, as the United States and Canada combined account for 23% of the total (OECD 2015). Developed OECD countries attract 73% of all international students enrolled abroad in 2013 according to OECD statistics and UNESCO Institute for Statistics. Among these countries, the United States hosted the largest number of all international students (19% in total), followed by the United Kingdom (10%), Australia and France (6%), Germany (5%) and Canada and Japan (both 3%). These destinations account for more than half of all tertiary students pursuing their studies abroad. Students from Asia represent 53% of international students enrolled worldwide, with China being the first supply country, followed by India. Asia is also the largest region of origin for international students in the UK (covering 54% of all international students countries of origin) (OECD 2015). In sum, the growing number of students from non-European countries moving to the West to pursue university degrees helps to ‘structure the hierarchically organised global field’ (Igarashi and Saito 2014) where UK HE has a prominent place. Universities in the UK note that international students bring significant economic benefits to the UK, which in fact helps to finance higher education for domestic students. Universities therefore aspire to attract international students and do so partly by the promise of internationalised attributes and global economy competences, which they claim to develop.

The overarching research aim in this context was to explore the development of ‘cosmopolitan competences’ among non-Western international students in the UK as an integral part of their global outlook. We were particularly interested in whether and how these international students

² All EU countries prior to the accession of the 10 candidate countries on 1 May 2004, plus the four eastern European member countries of the OECD, namely Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovak Republic (OECD Glossary of Statistical Terms 2005).

aspire to develop these ‘global competences’; the challenges they face in learning and using the competences associated with international study; whether and how they experience their development during their studies; and whether and how these can be exchanged after graduation as ‘cosmopolitan capital’ both in their careers and personal lives.

The study draws on research with international students conducted by the first author between November 2013 and January 2015. The paper specifically explores the development and deployment of cosmopolitan competences among non-Western international postgraduates (both masters and doctoral), with a particular focus on students’ views of their facilitation and value over a period spanning their studies and beyond. It uses examples from a multi-sited qualitative study on the experiences of international students in the UK and follows some of them after graduation back to their home countries. The researcher travelled to the particular students’ contexts. 88 students took part in the research, including 48 female and 40 male students and alumni: 28 were interviewed during their studies in the UK. In the second part of the study, 69 participants were interviewed in their home countries upon return. 14 people participated in the study longitudinally and were interviewed at least twice during their study in the UK and after their return to their home country. The paper draws on the interviews with these 69 returnee participants (including 14 longitudinal cases) from four non-Western countries. These are China, Thailand, Indonesia and Tanzania - they were most represented in the first interview round and were therefore subsequently selected for home country visits. Postgraduate students and returnees were selected with the assumption that they are likely to have a stronger sense of their own place in the world and their employment and mobility futures than undergraduate students. This is also where the largest concentration of international students is found, facilitating a balanced sample. Themes for the interviews included motivations regarding study and the development of cosmopolitan competences and how the subjects locate themselves and their personal trajectories through narratives of mobility, belonging, global inter-connectedness, and the space they occupy as they seek to make strategic use of their education. The interview data were transcribed and then coded and analysed with the assistance of Quirkos software. The codes were derived in part from the existing literature on cosmopolitan competence, with categories emerging from these theoretical foundations and also inductively from the data themselves.

Learning cosmopolitan competence

Given the scale of the study, and the theoretical framing set out above, we describe in the section below some patterns which demonstrate these phenomena. We illustrate these with selected interviewees' voices to set out some of the challenges, limitations and benefits they have found in learning, using and exchanging the competences associated with international study.

The majority of the participants entered the UK universities without previous experience of living and studying in a 'Western' country. For them, as Madge et al. (2015: 690) noticed, a detailed familiarity with 'new', 'globalized' knowledge proved necessary for becoming an international student in the first place. Students have familiarised themselves with systems - immigration regulations, application systems, and pedagogic languages - in order to gain mobility. Learning of the systems could be challenging as it continues during the entire study period. For example, in the middle of her postgraduate year in the UK when Jessica (22, China, MSc in Educational Studies) collected her passport from the Immigration Office, she found she was without the biometric residence permit being renewed to prove her identity and the permit to study or work in the UK (as the officials hadn't included it). She comments: 'It's not easy to say something about 'inclusive', especially for a Chinese girl in the UK. I have got the passport back without a new BPR [Biometric residence permit].' Although she eventually managed to stay legally in the UK and complete her degree, in her case and others' the visa procedures seem to impact on their sense of security and self-esteem as well as the sense of belonging to the place and academic community in general. At the first encounter within the new context, knowledge is already uneven as educators and others in universities generally do not need to acquire knowledge of the systems from which students come; they also rarely know about the education regimes or the immigration regulations that students have to negotiate to become 'international' (Madge et al. 2015: 690).

For most participants, their more openly expressed reasons for choosing to study abroad, those that come out first in discussion, are concerned with their academic and career ambitions; their underlying and more private reasons are concerned with the social pressures they face in their home countries (Habu 2000; Moskal 2016). For instance, Kevin (28 years old, Indonesian, MSc in Media and Communication) after obtaining a BA degree in Marketing from an Indonesian university, worked for two years at home. Kevin was not keen on furthering his studies at the time because he did not associate his development with an academic pathway. However, he went to the UK to do his MSs degree because he was the boy in the family and the only one without a postgraduate degree (his three sisters had already Masters

qualifications). He felt the need to satisfy his parents and to make them proud and accomplished this by obtaining a higher degree.

In their UK classrooms, many of these international postgraduates found it a struggle to be heard, to be able to overcome communication difficulties and experience positive classroom encounters. For example, Sam (27 years old, Thailand, MSc in Anthropology of Media, currently research fellow in Thailand) noted:

I didn't have a problem with understanding the lectures, but I found that I had problem with expressing my ideas. I tried to think of the things that I would like to share in the class, but I could not come up with anything at all.

For students like Sam, cultural and language differences and deficiencies may be seen as debilitating to participate in a dialogue.

Postgraduates' perception of their lack of voice and the idea of how they could contribute to the classroom was found to change over time (as in Gu, Schweisfurth and Day 2010). Participants like Peter highlighted the importance of noticing similarities between their home and host country rather than differences in order to gain voice. For instance, he reported feelings of insecurity over what he had learned before entering the university in the UK, but he learned to overcome these:

Yeah. First time I think I underestimated myself, but after a while, I thought, "OK, I'm not that bad." I can compare with other students abroad and what I've learned in Indonesia is still useful. In the UK, I have knowledge of what they're talking about, so OK. It's going to be good for me. Never underestimate yourself about studying. (Peter, 26 years old, MSc in HR Management).

Like Peter, with time, many international students begin to perceive their abilities differently. For example, Kevin said:

There is a language barrier sometimes when I am with people and have more knowledge than them and will speak up. When I first arrived, I was quiet and afraid but I learned not to do that. I started speaking up in class and I think I improved. I have more courage to share my opinions now. In Indonesia, there are not many people who have the

courage to speak up, especially the young people. This is an advantage that those who have studied abroad have in comparison to those who haven't studied abroad (28 years of age, Indonesia).

Several participants in the study expressed a lack of confidence and feeling of marginalization during their studies, often associated with their English language proficiency. International postgraduates talked not only about the difficulties of engaging across the differences of language and cultural background but hidden prejudices related to perceptions of otherness on both sides. For example, Jessica (22 years old, China, MSc in Education) describes her experience of feeling different from other students as: 'I think the native speakers maybe have some confidence here and it's become hard to make friends with the native speakers. The people, also teachers, help me, but they might think I'm a disabled person or just an idiot. I can tell from their eyes.'

Acquiring a voice over time to express themselves was mentioned by many of the students, who describe the process as 'hard work' and 'a challenge'. Edward (40 years old, doctoral student in Education, lecturer in Tanzania) also notes that some of the adaptations brought about long-term changes. He explains how the process of learning cultural competence occurred through overcoming the language barrier and gaining confidence:

I have changed how I look at things. Even the way I interact with people has changed. Initially, it was really difficult to speak fluently with a group of people, but now I find it easier. There was an English language barrier and a knowledge confidence barrier. It is different to how it used to be. Before coming here, I had to do a presentation, and I was very worried. Now, it would be very good.

The participants also reflected on the desire for the acquisition of social competences and as Glick Schiller et al note 'some of these possibilities emerge as cosmopolitan' (Glick Schiller, Darieva and Gruner-Domic 2011: 403). Jasmine from Indonesia (24 years old, MSc Research Methods, lecturer) was particularly articulate on that issue as she reported:

At first, the first thing is I kept thinking about what I wanted here and why should I go this far for a degree because I know I can get the same thing in Indonesia. Then, I discussed it with my friend who is also an Indonesian student, and she was asking

herself the same questions, like “Why should we go here?; “Why should we go so far?

” As a stranger, we have no parents here and also we are far away from our comfort zone in our home country. Maybe the experience is not for the degree but for the experience that we will both share, for our personalities and as a better person.

The skills and competences obtained from these experiences were often related to personal development and self-discovery. Jasmine revealed, for example, how encounters can foster positive self-reflection on her religious practices, allowing her to practice her Islamic faith more consciously: ‘I learn and I’m aware that I’m doing religious stuff, not because everyone else pushes me to do so, but because I’m making my own choices.’ She gives the example of being more careful about her food as she explains:

In Indonesia, the majority are Muslims, so I don’t need to ask them about the ingredients of the food, is it halal or not, so here I have to be more careful, and actually it’s very good for me so it’s also from a religious side, it makes me a better person. I have to be aware of the food and I perceive it as a challenge for me, from a religious aspect, so it proves my faith.

These conscious choices make Jasmine feel closer her culture and her country as she explained: ‘I never thought about the sense of being Indonesian or being Muslim in my home country because everyone is Indonesian and everyone is Muslim, it seems banal’. Her sense of identity as a Muslim and also as an Indonesian has changed during the study abroad period as encounters with ‘otherness’ make people not only conscious of difference but also enable them to reflect on their identities and belonging.

Jasmine’s reflection links to the general characteristics of the ‘university experience’ conceptualised as a period of intense transformation and self-exploration, with complex and overlapping personal and social influences significantly shaping educational spaces, subjects and subjectivities (Falconer and Taylor 2016: 1). Students like Jasmine welcome the multicultural university where opportunities for understanding themselves – and others – could emerge (Addison 2012, Mountford 2014). As she further narrates on her study abroad experience:

I have better social skills regarding making relationships with strangers, and also its shaped my cultural sense or something. As a result, I became a bit more tolerant of other people's culture.

Simultaneously, Jasmine signals the issue of being able to be a friend with everybody she studies with, but having as she describes the 'mind your own business' type of friendships that are new to her, pointing to the possibilities and limitations of the 'bothness' of cultural selves and universal values (Glick Schiller, Darieva and Gruner-Domic 2011: 403) while encountering the complex hierarchies, conflicts and exclusions in diverse spaces of higher education abroad (Falconer and Taylor 2016). Jasmine befriends mostly other international students, describing the same feeling of loneliness and the common academic adaptation issues that tie them up together. 'We feel the sense of strangeness' said Jasmine showing how 'otherness' also gives international students sense of belonging and can help them to form friendships.

A similar complexity of social relations could be found in Edward from Tanzania's report when he tries to tell about his experiences of exclusion:

It isn't easy to say. You may find some sense of different judgment. You wonder if you would be treated differently if you were a different colour. The university is just not very open. I have attended most of the teaching here, but when I am being taught I wonder if they would teach me in a different way if I were white or not from Tanzania. It's all very subtle.

Edward acknowledges that he developed his social skills regarding interactions with different people from diverse background and cultures. But he also adds with certain bitterness about difficulties in building social relationships abroad, reflecting a critical perspective on the individualism of this context compared to his home:

It is not very easy to interact with foreigners when you come here. Here you can't just say 'hi' to someone you don't know, so it's hard to establish networks. People here won't say 'hi' if they don't know you. I don't find it open here.

Finally, Lucy's reflection (39, a lecturer in Tanzania, studied three years in Belgium for her Masters in Statistics and Mathematics and four years in the UK for her PhD in science education), illustrates the change that international study made in her mental attitude to mobility and cross-cultural contacts. She said after her return to her home country:

I cannot say I feel like an international academic / person, but I think I'm in the middle, I value my tradition, and I like being who I am now, local, but I'm happy. I know what's going on in the Western countries, the culture of Western people, at least now I can have a dialogue with Western people, without any problem, without any hesitation.

Jasmine, Edward and Lucy's reports make us consider the tension between the need to adapt and the need for loyalty to student's self (belonging) and their 'cultural beliefs and values that are not susceptible to change'. Thus, many will continue to experience a sense of boundary or 'otherness' when confronted with conflicting values and beliefs (Kim 2005).

Many of the students drew contrasts between the UK and their country in regard to classroom practices and the wider social sphere. They engaged with the notion of cultural difference between the so-called 'East' and 'West' but did not ascribe any superior value to the 'West'. Participants were able to speak of moving fluidly between their home and host nations in order to acquire educational and other resources during their international journey. For instance, Carolyn (26 years old, Thailand, MSc in Business Management) admitted:

I feel like maybe life is more exciting and enjoyable to me because I have travelled a lot, I have seen a lot of things. If I hadn't got the chance to come abroad, I wouldn't be satisfied with my life so much because I would just stay at the same place, doing the same thing and seeing the same people. But, when I'm here, I can get a chance to meet new people, see new things, and then it's more about working. In the end, if I want to go another country, I have friends there. I can contact them if I want to do business there, I can ask them what it's like or make connections in the same way.

Carolyn's case illustrates the pattern among the interviewees that international experience empowers them to think strategically about how they use their global education to build their social and professional networks. Simultaneously, Carolyn feels that in practice, it would be

difficult to work abroad: 'If I would open my own business, I will go back to Thailand for sure because I feel it is easier as a native to open or to do something. When I'm abroad, I feel like I don't belong to that place'.

Using and exchanging cosmopolitan competence

The interviews with returnees provided an opportunity to ask the participants not only about the specific skills and competencies they developed but also how these related to their lives and work upon their return to their home countries.

Before returning home, some participants worried about the possibility of using their new competences because of social constraints they remembered in the culture of the home country. For example, Peter (26 years old MSc in HR Management, Indonesia) reflected on gaining confidence during his period of study to speak up and not be afraid to say what he thinks. He was concerned during this study, however, about whether he could maintain his confidence upon the return to his home country. He believed many Indonesian young people were afraid to talk, oppressed in silence by the older generation they have to listen to. Peter comments:

In Indonesia, there are not many people who have the courage to speak up, especially the young people. That is why many people with overseas diploma do not want to come back to Indonesia because they want to be respected and they get new confidence by being abroad, then they are afraid to come back because they might not get the respect they want now.

Interestingly, after their return, many found that these fears were not completely justified. For instance, David (31, Thailand, PhD in Science Education) reported that after coming back and settling in his new work place (one of the major Thai universities) he appreciates the developing 'cosmopolitan environment' back home:

I will say all my colleagues have experience in doing research and studying abroad, but for a shorter period of time. So far as I'm concerned there are more similarities than differences. I don't think we have discussed anything related to the differences but similarities, really.

Some participants reflect on the way they are able to use their skills and competence in the work place after returning to their home country without negative reactions from their compatriots. For instance, Pam (30 years old, Thailand, studied in the UK for her MSc and PhD in Business, University lecturer) reported how her teaching techniques in the class changed since she acquired analytical and reflective skills abroad:

I think when I came back and I got assigned to classes of students, and I feel that I would like to teach in totally different way than before. I tried to divide each section into parts and not only teaching on the boards but do some workshops where the students do things and discuss together like for an hour, and they had presented at the end of the class as well, so the technique of teaching that I do now is very different from what I planned to do before I went to study.

In addition to the skills mentioned, participants felt that many employers did value an international perspective, both in terms of technical knowledge and ability to adapt to a globalised work environment. For instance, in her account Jane (24 years old, China, also completed her one-year postgraduate marketing degree in the UK) also illustrated this, and the depth of skill that she acquired and valued:

I think, especially for an international company, they want to hire somebody who not only can speak English but also knows the culture because they have foreign staff, so it's actually that they need people who can work with diverse people with different backgrounds. So if the students have experience abroad, they may have more experience in communicating with different groups of people.

Jane's employment in a transnational educational institution could serve as an example of how cultural competence acquired abroad could be used and converted into capital.

However, while the internationalisation of education is sometimes presented primarily in terms of employer requirements for a workforce with the skills needed to operate in an international environment, and employers evidently valued those skills among these interviewees, the overall picture of what these learners acquire and how it is valued is richer and more complex. To a considerable extent, the students perceived the international experience rather than the overseas credentials as offering them particular advantages. Such advantages were not

commonly packaged in the form of ‘hard currencies’—an overseas education qualification—but more as ‘soft currencies’, interpersonal skills and intercultural competence, enhanced English language proficiency and independence (Li 2013: 488). In Bourdieu’s (1986) terms, the institutional cultural capital associated with formal overseas degrees becomes increasingly difficult to convert to other forms of capital, especially economic capital, and therefore, its perceived value was declining.

Similarly, in the students’ narratives about the competences acquired abroad, the participants seem to be less concerned with the technical, specialised knowledge, and more concerned with the acquisition of generic life skills, personal development, social networks and incorporated cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). In some case, graduates like Henry (37 years old, Indonesia, MSc in Accounting, works in a bank in Jakarta) reported that he did not find any application for the technical knowledge he had gained during his postgraduate studies in accounting for his current work in the bank: ‘My current work is very different from my study area, so how can I implement and relate my knowledge to my new area?’ He highlighted other qualities that he had gained instead:

The good thing is that if you study abroad, you get more exposure with other nations; you can get more interactions with other people. It gives you more confidence to share knowledge, to get to know people and to make new opinions, new things.

Many participants, especially these from China, expressed the view that the formal diploma (institutionalised culture capital) was not a primary benefit to them. For example, Alice (24 years old, studied finance three years for undergraduate and one-year postgraduate degrees in the UK) commented on the value of her study experiences abroad: ‘In terms of my job or career, I don't think the studying abroad was useful because a lot of students from study abroad come back to China’. She did, however, see other advantages in overseas study, especially in how the social skills and symbolic capital she accumulated abroad were perceived when she returned to her home country: ‘I made many new friends, and I know a lot of different cultures now.’ She commented: ‘When I came back, I talked with my friends. I shared my experience of the study abroad, and they said "Wow, so cool!" They were impressed.’ In the work environment, however, such status was the norm.

At work, there were other people graduated from the USA or the UK, but we did not talk about that international experience at work with other overseas graduates, we were just busy with work.

The students emphasised the cultural and social competence they have developed as cosmopolitan disposition and practices by relying on both their specific cultural ‘self’ and the broader human aspirations that they access, deploy, internalise and reconstitute in different situations (Glick Schiller et al 2011: 403). The accounts of these international students suggest that to some extent they do learn, use, and exchange cosmopolitan competency, but this process is situated in complex dynamics and identity reshaping both during their studies and upon their return home. The data generally point to cultural and social competence rather than capital, but the potential of exchanging competence for capital may emerge further over time.

Conclusions

Despite the fact that the link between higher education and access to a well-paid job is weakening, the global demand for university places and international study continues to increase (Li and Lowe 2015). To attract international students, universities claim to develop internationalised attributes and global economy competences, putting an increasing emphasis on ‘student experience’ in addition to the value of the formal qualification for employability.

In this paper, international students’ voices demonstrate that their acquisition of cosmopolitan competency is important to them, but does not happen easily and does not necessarily convert automatically into capital/ benefits in regional and national labour markets. Beyond the labour market benefits, this article shows how cosmopolitan competency can be related to ability to connect with the people from other cultures, appreciation of diverse cultures and view of one’s own culture in a new context. These values are not necessarily the same as universities’ construction of the desirable outcomes of international study.

Finally, these international postgraduates also note limitations to social connectedness and openness often linked to the power imbalances in internationalised higher education, and the attendant limitations on their voice and agency. If diversity should be promoted as a key aspect of university internationalization, these structural inequalities need to be discussed more openly and further unpacked. For example, a university in the UK (and other ‘Western’ countries), wanting to be recognised as an international study environment with a significant share of

international students, should be able to openly acknowledge there are limits to their understanding of cultural issues, where the onus is on the international student to adapt, while aiming to redress the balance. These issues could be relevant to the experiences of classroom interactions, teaching styles and content, life at university, and extends to the legal arrangements of international students' access to the institution and the value of their mobility.

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